

The Women's Army Corps

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The Introduction of the Skirt and Stocking Clad Soldier at Fort Hancock

"There are innumerable duties now being performed by soldiers that can actually be done better by women." -General George Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, December 1941.

The United States Army was the first of America's military branches to enlist women in World War II. The mission of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) was to provide support to the Army by releasing men from administrative duties to serve in combat. From the beginning, the WAAC bill met opposition. At this time, most women did not work outside the home, and a woman serving in uniform was unfathomable. Other opposition included the defense industry that needed women to work in factories. The United States Government, however, learned from their British allies that women were needed for the war effort. Great Britain even drafted women, because it was essential for their country's survival.

Once Pearl Harbor was attacked and the United States entered the war, women worked at aircraft spotting stations without any pay or military status. Six thousand women volunteered to help the war effort. Despite all the opposition, Congress passed the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps bill and it was signed into law on May 14, 1942.

Corp Requirements

Recruitment requirements to join the Army included that each woman be over twenty-one and less than fifty years of age, be of good health and character, stand between five and six feet tall, weigh 105 to 200 pounds, and have completed high school. Over 13,000 women applied for the initial 450 WAAC officers' slots. The average woman filling Officer or Enlisted positions had a Bachelors Degree. These women received less pay than men and had an obscure ranking system with titles that ranged from Auxiliary to Director. Despite this, women saw the WAAC as an opportunity for career advancement, a chance to broaden cultural experiences and job skills, and the ability to meet people of different backgrounds, especially through overseas travel. The Army was the only service branch to offer overseas duty to women.

These inspirational words to the inaugural commencement training class on July 23, 1942, by Oveta Culp Hobby, the Corps' first Director set the tone for this great change.

"You have just made the change from peacetime pursuits to wartime tasks - from the individualism of civilian life to the anonymity of mass military life. You have given up comfortable homes, highly paid positions, leisure. You have taken off silk and put on khaki. And all for essentially the same reason. You have a debt and a date - a debt to democracy and a date with destiny."

By September 1943, the success of the Corps led to dropping of the auxiliary status and the creation of the Women's Army Corps (WAC) with the same pay, ranks and privileges as male soldiers. While women were given the option of leaving the Corps at this time, most members saw this change in status as an increased benefit and it acted as not only a morale boost but also as an incentive to join. Women were in the Army now.

The Uniform

The design for a uniform for the women was not given much time or thought due to the wartime workload placed on the Quartermaster Corps. The part of the uniform that did receive attention was the insignia. The WAC insignia chosen was Pallas Athene, the Greek goddess of war, who represented victory and wisdom by fighting only just causes. It was not until 1945, that the Quartermaster Corps created a design team for women's uniforms. Before this, WAC uniforms had shirt collars and skirts that never fit properly. The ill-fitting skirts did not take women's hips into account, and were designed to be 16 inches off the ground no matter the height of the woman. This created marching soldiers with matching hemlines. Each woman received olive drab underwear and slippers, tan oxfords with a small heel, and five pairs of rayon stockings four times a year. Women's hair needed to be worn in a way as to not touch the shirt collar. Despite these problems, the members of the Corp loved wearing the uniform and felt empowered by it. One woman stated, "The uniform creates a sense of security, I feel perfectly safe when I have it on." The news media was fascinated by the women's uniform and was surprised that women weren't upset with the loss of individuality.

Fort Hancock's New Arrivals

During World War II, Fort Hancock's garrison grew in size from a peacetime force of less than 1,000, to between 7,000 to 12,000. In 1943, the Fort changed in other ways - women in uniform arrived. According to a report in the Post newspaper, the *Sandy Hook Foghorn*, at 3 p.m. on June 23, 1943, Fort Hancock welcomed seven WAACs, its first cadre of skirt and stocking clad soldier. From such humble beginnings, the WAAC increased to a total strength of seventy members.

When asked what she liked most about the fort, Auxiliary Virginia Owens answered, "The manner in which the enlisted men have treated us. They have been simply swell." Junior Leader Hedwig Bazarewski expressed,

"Everyone has made us feel completely at home here. None of us ever had been at a real Army Post before and we were extremely excited when we arrived.... All the officers and enlisted men have been perfectly wonderful to us and we all want to thank them."

The Job

The Army assigned WAACs to work in the Army Ground, Air and Service Forces. At Fort Hancock, the WAAC detachment was assigned to the 1225th Army Service Unit, Second Service Command, which provided administrative and logistical support. Women were soon working around Fort Hancock at the Post Exchange, Motor Pool, Post Headquarters, Mess Hall, Commissary, Finance Office and the Dental Office. A few months after their arrival, the WAAC auxiliary status was dropped. Regarding this change, Colonel J.C. Haw, Fort Hancock Commander remarked, "Every non-civilian job at Fort Hancock which a woman can do will be assigned to a WAC. Each job taken over is a contribution to winning the war, for each WAC will replace a man who is vitally needed for combat service."

The Living Arrangements

The Army had great concerns about the living arrangements for the women. Army Regulations required that 150 feet separate a women's barracks from men's or have an intervening structure. At Fort Hancock, newly renovated Barracks #25, became the women's home and a men's

barracks next to theirs was converted into the post headquarters building. This barracks was also strictly off limits to male soldiers with one exception. According to the *Sandy Hook Foghorn*, many men wanted to join the newspaper staff to deliver the weekly because they were required to deposit it in each barrack's day room. Just like the men, they slept in double deck wooden beds and received a GI foot and wall locker. Unlike the men, the WAC barracks received sheets, window shades, showers and toilets with curtains, and a laundry with washtubs, drying racks and ironing boards. Auxiliary Camilla Blanton thought the best thing on post was, "... the building in which we're going to live. That's a honey."

The Results

The military originally requested women to do clerical work. It was believed they did this better than men, but the Army soon realized many other skills. When the war ended, women were in 401 of the 625 Army occupation codes. This also included war zone locations where 181 were killed in the line of duty. Over 150,000 women served in the Women's Army Corps and at its peak in 1945, there were 99,000 women serving in the United States Army.



Members of the Women's Army Corps take the Oath of Allegiance as members of the Army, 1943.



WACs being escorted back to Barracks 25 after a double date.